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RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN 2149
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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1537
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 0936
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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0170
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2039
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 006155

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: RTG REMAINS HOPEFUL ABOUT ROLE FOR ASEAN IN BURMA,
CIVIL SOCIETY LESS OPTIMISTIC

REF: A. BANGKOK 5801
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 6106

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: MFA working level contacts continued to view ASEAN as having the potential to successfully steer the Burmese junta towards political and economic reform. The organization's midnight statement on November 19th, essentially enshrining its long-standing policy of non-interference in the case of Burma, was not a defeatist maneuver, the MFA insisted. ASEAN would continue to support the good offices of UN Special Representative Ibrahim Gambari, while simultaneously exploring as yet unformulated options for a new role for ASEAN in Burma. Civil society representatives in Thailand that focus on Burma did not share the RTG's confidence in ASEAN. Following the November Summit in Singapore, civil society representatives told us they held little expectation that governments in the region would actively assist Burma's democracy movement. END SUMMARY.

ASEAN ON THE SIDELINES?

2.(C) United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's December 9-11 visit to Thailand generated renewed interest in the Thai

media regarding the RTG's policy on Burma. According to MFA Director in the Department of East Asian Affairs Kallayana Vipattipumiprates, Prime Minister Surayud, in his meeting with Ban Ki-moon, delivered the same message the RTG delivered to Gambari two months ago: Thailand supported the efforts of Gambari and believed that dialogue would lead to reconciliation in Burma. (Septel describes Prime Minister Surayud's readout of the visit.) Kallayana conceded that despite ASEAN's repeated efforts to engage Burma and play an active role in reconciliation efforts, General Than Shwe and his counterparts had rebuffed ASEAN every time. Nonetheless, Kallayana reiterated that ASEAN continued to believe it was important that Burma remained engaged with the regional organization for political development to occur.

13. (C) At the same time, Kallayana recognized that ASEAN faced limits in what it could do until Burma demonstrated its willingness to cooperate. At the November Summit in Singapore, Burmese officials took ASEAN by surprise when they vehemently rejected the idea of Gambari's briefing and insisted that they be allowed to conduct their internal affairs as they deemed appropriate. This statement, which followed weeks of negotiations to clear the way for Gambari to brief the Summit on his work on Burma, directly appealed to ASEAN's commitment to non-interference. The result, according to a Bangkok-based Singaporean diplomat, was that ASEAN was forced to concede to Burma's opposition to Gambari's proposed briefing. "We are still recovering," the Singaporean added "and we need more time to formulate a thoughtful response." He concluded that "some observers" (read USG and Western countries) expected too much too quickly from ASEAN members.

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WHAT'S IN IT FOR BURMA?

14. (C) Yet there remained opportunities for ASEAN to intercede in events in Burma, claimed both Kallayana and the Singaporean diplomat. ASEAN will continue to support Gambari's mission and was exploring new options to do so. The newly-signed Charter may also offer opportunities to address Burma once the organization began designing implementation mechanisms, particularly related to the Charter's human rights clause. Nevertheless, both our contacts acknowledged that ASEAN may be unable to begin implementation of the Charter until it is ratified by all signatories.

15. (C) In the meantime, Kallayana suggested that China may have to be convinced to put pressure on Burma to allow ASEAN to play a role. He also repeated his earlier proposal (Ref A) for humanitarian assistance and cooperation. The Burmese junta had focused on minor political developments over the past few months, he observed, without offering a firm commitment to any type of long-term reform. While Kallayana believed this was nevertheless a meaningful beginning, he contended that the Burmese must go further to maintain the momentum created by recent events. To encourage this, the region and the international community must let the ruling junta know how it stood to benefit from political and economic reform. Kallayana suggested the use of humanitarian assistance coordinated by the ASEAN Secretariat. (Ref A) He admitted that to date his proposal lacked support from both sides (Burma and ASEAN), but claimed that coordination of humanitarian assistance is a proven strategy for exercising influence within ASEAN. Furthermore, despite tepid responses from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia due to concerns that interference in Burma would be followed by interference in those countries, Kallayana was confident that these governments would find humanitarian cooperation acceptable. Regardless of the approach taken, both Kallayana and our Singaporean contact felt that any role played by ASEAN, even if it appeared minor, would be important to addressing the

situation in Burma.

CIVIL SOCIETY DOUBTS ROLE OF ASEAN

16. (C) Civil society representatives we spoke with did not share Kallayana's enthusiasm about ASEAN's prospects for shepherding political change into Burma, however. Burmese Irrawaddy news magazine founder and editor Aung Zaw questioned if the battle was already lost, since the ruling junta had made its rigidity clear. Aung Zaw emphasized that he held no hope for Burma's willingness to engage with ASEAN.

The performance of ASEAN leaders at November's Summit only confirmed his misgivings about the potential for the regional institution to effectively intervene in Burma. In his view, that was not the first time ASEAN leaders allowed Burma "to essentially hijack their deliberations," which he attributed to ASEAN's "timid and shy" character. Burma Coordinator for the regional NGO ALTSEAN, Debbie Stothard, concurred with Aung Zaw's views, and added that if ASEAN governments remained unwilling or unable to stand up against the Burmese,

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then civil society would continue to do so for them. "We are more than happy to play bad cop to the government's good cop."

COMMENT

17. (C) While the ASEAN Summit failed to address conditions in Burma forcefully, our diplomatic interlocutors here believe leading member countries have not completely thrown in the towel. We sense that people within the Thai MFA, as well as our Singaporean contact, do hope for progress, although they are not willing to disavow the slow and cautious ASEAN method.
BOYCE